

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 012736

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/2014

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [CO](#) [AUC](#)

SUBJECT: AUC COMMANDER MANCUSO DEMOBILIZES WITH CATATUMBO BLOC

REF: BOGOTA 12188

Classified By: DCM Milton K. Drucker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Over 1400 members of the AUC's Catatumbo Bloc -- including AUC military commander Salvatore Mancuso -- demobilized in a public ceremony in Norte de Santander Department on December 10. The Bloc surrendered over 1500 quality weapons, as well as over 150 pieces of real estate in the region. In his address, Mancuso asked for forgiveness from the Colombian people, foreign nations -- particularly the U.S. -- and "every mother whose pain (he) had caused or permitted." Most of the demobilizing fighters were young men from the departments of Norte de Santander, Cordoba, or Antioquia, and the GOC will set up reinsertion centers for the demobilized fighters in these three departments. Residents of the Catatumbo region -- and demobilized Catatumbo Bloc fighters -- have reasonable concerns about a FARC resurgence in the region, and the GOC has responded by permanently transferring an entire counter guerrilla battalion from Arauca to Catatumbo. Peace Commissioner Restrepo has asked the Embassy to support GOC efforts to secure the region by conducting an aggressive aerial eradication campaign northwest of the Catatumbo River and providing the COLMIL presence in the zone with riverine patrol boats and military helicopters. End Summary.

Demobilization: Guns and Grenades, Homes and Haciendas

2. (SBU) On December 10, in what GOC High Commissioner for Peace Luis Carlos Restrepo characterized as the largest demobilization in Colombian history, 1,423 members of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia's (AUC) Catatumbo Bloc -- including AUC military commander Salvatore Mancuso -- demobilized in a formal ceremony in a rural zone of Tibu municipality, Norte de Santander Department. The paramilitary fighters, divided into field troops dressed in fatigues and urban operatives in specially ordered tee-shirts, turned in over 1500 weapons that OAS Verification Mission inspectors confirmed were in excellent condition. According to official OAS figures, the GOC collected over 950 AK-47 (some with Colombian military (COLMIL) markings), 50 side arms, 600 grenades, 20 mortars, and 10 RPGs. The weapons were transported that evening via armed convoy to the departmental capital of Cucuta, where they will be stored until the GOC passes a regulation authorizing their destruction.

3. (SBU) The Catatumbo Bloc provided the GOC with a list of local assets it was surrendering as part of the demobilization, including 105 rural properties, 58 urban homes and businesses, 10 boats, and 45 mules. The Bloc also turned over several vehicles and 15 dogs trained to detect explosives. According to Restrepo, the GOC will attempt to return illegally seized real estate to its rightful owners, although many properties originally seized from Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or National Liberation Army (ELN) sympathizers are likely to go unclaimed. Funds from the sale of unclaimed buildings and lands will be invested in a compensation fund for victims of paramilitary violence.

The Guests: A High-Powered Crowd in a Neglected Region

4. (SBU) Restrepo presided over the demobilization ceremony, where he was joined at the head table by Mancuso, Monsignor Jorge Vidal, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Monteria, Cordoba Department, Sergio Caramanga, director of the OAS Verification Mission in Colombia, Ivan Roberto Duque, aka "Ernesto Baez," the rhetorically-gifted commander of the paramilitary Central Bolivar Bloc (BCB), the governor of Norte de Santander, and the mayors of Cucuta and Tibu. Also present at the event were members of congress sympathetic to the AUC, including representatives Eleonora Pineda and Rocio Arias and Senator Carlos Moreno.

Belated Repentance

15. (U) Under a withering tropical sun, Mancuso addressed paramilitary troops assembled on a muddy field that passed for an improvised parade ground. In a speech punctuated more than once with what appeared to be heartfelt emotion, he asked for "the forgiveness of the people of Colombia. "I ask," he said, "for the forgiveness of the nations of the world, among them the United States of America, if by action or omission I have offended them. I beg for the forgiveness of every mother whose pain we have caused or permitted. I assume my responsibility for the leadership I have exercised, for what I could have done better, and for what I could have done and did not do." Catatumbo Bloc commander alias "Camilo," a former Colombian Army captain, also asked for forgiveness for his errors, particularly his decision to desert and join the AUC.

Profile of the Troops

16. (C) "Camilo" was not the only ex-member of the Colombian military among the demobilizing troops. An Embassy official present at the event spoke to a young fighter who admitted to deserting the Army and joining the AUC after he was accused of killing civilians in southern Bolivar department. Nearly all the former fighters -- only about 30 of whom were women -- appeared to be in their late teens to mid twenties. According to a survey of the demobilizing fighters conducted on site by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), less than a third were from Norte de Santander Department. Nearly a third were from Cordoba, birthplace of the AUC, and almost 20 percent from the department of Antioquia, most from its lowland Uraba region. As a result of the survey, the GOC will establish reinsertion centers for former Catatumbo Bloc members in Cucuta, Monteria, and Turbo, in Uraba, where the AUC's Bananero Bloc demobilized on November 25 (reftel).

17. (U) Although most members of the Catatumbo Bloc were from outside the region, hundreds of family members of local recruits were present at the event. As demobilized fighters wandered among the spectators after laying down their weapons, mothers slogged through the mud to embrace their prodigal sons, most of whom will have to depart the region out of fear of FARC reprisals.

Security Concerns and Pleas for Assistance

18. (SBU) Concerns about a guerrilla -- and particularly a FARC -- resurgence in the coca-rich Catatumbo region was palpable among both local residents and former fighters. Residents of many Catatumbo communities have noted an increase in FARC presence since the demobilization was announced, some claim the FARC has summoned "cocalero" community leaders to discuss the new organization of the drug trade, and the current managers of most formerly AUC-owned businesses have fled the region. According to local OAS officials, the most common concern they heard in their mandatory interviews with demobilizing fighters was that the FARC would take advantage of their absence to retake former paramilitary zones in Catatumbo, negating the sacrifices they made to secure the region.

19. (C) To address residents' legitimate security concerns, the Army's Second Division has transferred -- permanently -- an entire counter guerrilla battalion from Arauca Department to Catatumbo. Restrepo told the Embassy that the USG could support GOC efforts to consolidate Government control of the region by conducting an aggressive aerial eradication campaign northwest of the Catatumbo River, where most of Catatumbo's coca is grown. He emphasized that this campaign should include the nearly 2000 acres of coca controlled by the FARC in Bari National Park, in northern Norte de Santander along the border with Venezuela. (Note: The GOC has so far not permitted spraying in national parks, so Restrepo's request is probably merely personal.) Restrepo also asked for USG assistance in providing the COLMIL with patrol boats to use on the navigable Catatumbo River, which was previously controlled by the AUC, as well as two military helicopters. According to Restrepo, the COLMIL currently has no air assets in the Catatumbo region.

WOOD